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DLA, NIB Sign Agreement to Provide Employment for Agency

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The Defense Logistics Agency and the National Industries for the Blind have teamed up in an arrangement that could result in as much as 20 percent of the Agency's workforce being populated by blind or disabled people within the next two decades.

DLA officials believe this is a first attempt by any federal agency to use an organization such as NIB as a recruiter to tap the brainpower of a group of people previously relied upon to supply office products for the federal government.

Rear Adm. Raymond A. Archer, DLA vice director, and James Gibbons, NIB president, signed the agreement July 30 at DLA Headquarters. In effect, NIB has become an employment agency for DLA, a partnership that will refer qualified people with disabilities for employment consideration with DLA. The results could be almost immediate.

Jeffrey Neal, DLA director of human resources, said DLA will seek referrals from NIB and its associated agencies right away. "I expect to see results this summer," he said, "with our next addition of interns to emerge from this agreement. We could see thousands of referrals with blind or disabled people making up 20 percent of our work force in the next 20 years."

NIB was incorporated more than 60 years ago as a result of the Wagner-O'Day Act, later amended as the Javits-Wagner-O'Day Act. The legislation established a federal mandate for the purchase of products manufactured by organizations employing people who were blind or had other severe disabilities.

NIB's mission is to enhance opportunities for economic and personal independence of people who are blind, primarily through creating, sustaining and improving employment. NIB-associated agencies employ people who are blind to provide more than 2,000 products and services to the federal government

A small federal agency, the Committee for Purchase from People Who are Blind or Severely Disabled, administers the Javits-Wagner-O'Day, or JWOD, Program. Archer is the DoD member, and said he was especially pleased and excited to get started on the joint NIB-DLA venture.

"From a business perspective, this has so many rights to it," Archer said. "DLA has a need for brainpower. In the logistics area of our business, that's what we focus on. In the Ebusiness revolution, there's a whole group of talent out there that we should reach out to and touch. This brings a whole new work force to us to become part of the full team."

The admiral noted DLA's "long history with JWOD in buying products. With the business revolution, they will now be part of our business. We're tapping into their capabilities to provide us a work force who does the day-to-day logistics business."

Archer said the talent pool within NIB and its affiliates is extremely well suited to DLA's organization. "We are in a workstation-based environment," he said, "with ninety-five percent of our people at work stations. Very few [people] touch product any more. That means the blind and the disabled can work right at the heart of our business. That's brainpower, and that's what we're looking for."

Gibbons, the NIB president, voiced similar hopes for the DLA-NIB partnership. "This is an incredible opportunity," he said. "The JWOD program has done untold good, not only in terms of direct employment it creates around this country, but in terms of creating an environment that promotes the capabilities of people who are blind and severely disabled."

Joining with DLA, he added, "is a very tangible way of demonstrating the success of the program in terms of creating an environment of success for a segment of the population that really operates with a pretty low employment rate. This program will put people to work within the JWOD program in long-term career opportunities."

Turning to Archer, Gibbons said, "This contract and this program will be a spectacular demonstration of matching people's capabilities with your organizational mission."

As part of its services, NIB will prescreen resumes and interview candidates to ensure that they are qualified to perform the duties of a vacant position. Applicants will be screened to make sure they have appropriate interpersonal or vocational skills in areas such as computer use, typing speed and accuracy.

NIB will also conduct background checks and reference verification for referred candidates. The organization might also visit job sites to identify accommodations needed for people who are blind or otherwise disabled.

Gibbons said NIB will work closely with state agencies to ensure that job coaching and specialized equipment are provided. NIB will receive payment only for candidates actually hired by DLA. Neal said, "The fee is minimal compared to the benefits DLA can achieve by diversifying its workforce."

After signing the agreement, Archer looked ahead to a close working relationship with NIB. "This is a partnership," he said. "Partnerships are hard work. The real partnership is going to be built as we get into this business together. You have to have the strength and the courage to believe we will get it right, and I trust both teams. I'm looking forward to it."

The partnership agreement represents the culmination of a cooperative effort by DLA's Offices of Human Resources, Small and Disadvantaged Business Utilization, DLA Support Services Corporate Contracting, and the National Industries for the Blind.